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ABSTRACT

Education is individualized in measure as the learning goals an individual pursues, and the means whereby he works toward them, are selected for and by him. Individualization is not limited to independent learning or learning in a tutor-student dyad. Depending on learning goal and learner characteristics, individualized education also can occur in group contexts. Individualization is fostered through emphasizing student involvement in choosing and conducting learning activities. Managing individualized instructional programs in schools depends greatly on student self-direction accomplished either through using programmed materials or through students' developing competencies in selecting, planning, and conducting learning tasks. (Author)

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A DEFINITION OF INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION

by Glen Heathers

Individualized education refers to any procedures used to ensure that the individual student receives instruction that is specifically appropriate for him. A general definition is this: Individualized education consists of planning and conducting, with each student, general programs of study and day-to-day lessons that are tailor-made to suit his learning needs and his characteristics as a learner. Note that this definition requires starting with the individual, not the group, in planning what to teach. Currently, most instruction is planned for groups. Schools today individualize with some students some of the time, particularly by drawing students out of the total group for special, remedial, enrichment, or honors instruction.

It is a mistake to identify individualization merely with tutoring or independent study. Tutoring is just one way to achieve individualization. Independent study, such as that made possible by programed instruction or that occurring when students conduct individual projects, also is just one form of individualization.

Group teaching and individualization

Group teaching is not ruled out by individualization. Whenever, at the same time, different students are ready to study the same tasks in a similar way through group presentation and discussion, it is desirable to assemble and teach them as a group. Such groupings should be temporary and only for teaching those things with which the students in the group are well-matched in terms of specific learning objectives, appropriate study methods, and the timing of learning.

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Administrative grouping is not the same as instructional grouping. It is proper and necessary to assign a group of students to a teacher (or to a team of teachers). The teacher assumes certain administrative responsibilities for the group as well as responsibilities for teaching members of the group. Individualization requires differentiating instruction offered members of the assigned group by planning with and for each member separately, then carrying out the requirements of the plans made. Those plans should determine what sorts of individual or group learning provisions are employed.

Individualization and student self-direction

Individualization is not all-or-none; it can exist in various forms and to various degrees. Some individualization occurs whenever a teacher gives attention to a student, responds to his queries, checks his progress, or offers him help. Most often, responding to one student has the limitation that the teacher cannot at the same time give individual attention to other students. This poses the central problem of individualization: How is it possible, with a student/teacher ratio of 20-1 or higher, for each student continually to follow learning plans that are tailor-made to his specifications?

The key to individualized education is student self-direction in the sense that the student learns effectively without continual guidance or assistance from a teacher. Three ways of obtaining a high degree of student self-direction can be distinguished. One is to provide the student with programed learning materials that offer him specific cues for undertaking and proceeding with learning tasks. A second is for students to assist one another in a peer tutor or student team context. A third is for the student to possess and use competencies in planning and conducting his own learning activities.

Individualization and mastery

A chief justification for individualized education is that it can provide the means whereby every student regularly achieves mastery of the learning tasks he undertakes. Mastery criteria are linked to the specific objectives of the learning unit or task. These objectives set the level of advancement or sophistication the student is expected to reach. The conditions for attaining mastery are these: the learning task has been selected as appropriate for the student in the sense that he possesses the prerequisites for it; appropriate learning materials and equipment are provided the student; appropriate instructional methods are employed; and the student is allowed sufficient time to learn the task well.

For the student, mastery should mean that he can retain and use what he has studied, that he doesn't have to keep doing work over, that his success increases his motivation to learn, and that he develops an enhanced self-concept based on perceiving his success. For the teaching staff, mastery should minimize the need for remedial teaching, reduce discipline problems resulting from faulty instruction, and increase teachers' feelings of satisfaction based on a job well done.

Modes of individualized education

In adapting education to the individual student's learning needs and learner characteristics, six different modes for individualization can be employed. These are:

1. Different students can work on different tasks toward different goals, as occurs when students work on independent projects, when they take elective courses, or when they pursue special programs of study.

2. Different students can use different learning materials or equipment in working toward the same goal.

3. Different students can study a given task in different types of individual or group learning settings.

4. Different students can be assigned to different teachers to produce effective teacher/student match-ups.

5. Different students can study a given learning unit via different methods of teaching/learning: independent study, seminar discussion, lecture, participant observation, tutorial assistance, etc.

6. Different students can be allowed different amounts of time as needed to achieve mastery of the learning task.

Effective individualization will employ all of these modes in planning and conducting the educational program.

Instructional model for individualization

The teachers' job in conducting individualized education of any type requires satisfying five basic requirements. These are:

1. Decide, with and for the individual student, what learning task he next should pursue within the given curricular area.

2. Assess the extent to which the student already has mastered the objectives of the task.

3. Assess the student's learner characteristics (often called "learning style") to determine how best he can work on the task.

4. Use the assessment data in working out with the student a lesson plan that specifies the particular things he has yet to learn in the task, the materials and equipment he will employ, the learning settings he will use, and the procedures he will follow in mastering the task.

5. Provide individual help as needed, monitor the student's progress, assess his mastery of the task, and re-cycle beginning with the selection of the next learning task as soon as the student has demonstrated mastery of the current task.

The generality of the definition offered

The definition of individualized education offered here is meant to apply to achieving any type of learning goal in any curriculum area and within any type of individualized program. It can cover education directed toward acquiring knowledge, toward developing learner competencies, or toward

developing attitudes, interests, values, or interpersonal behaviors. It can be used in designing, or in analyzing and assessing, diverse types of individualized programs as illustrated by individually prescribed instruction (IPI), PLAN, the Montessori approach, the British Infant School approach, the project method, or programs of independent study.